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AUTHOR Flachmann, Kim; Pluta, Kate
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ABSTRACT

Two faculty members from a California community college and a nearby state university worked together to articulate placement and assessment procedures in writing courses at the two institutions to better serve students transferring from one to the other. Historically the institutions, Bakersfield College (California) (BC) and California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB) had established hostile relations and independent placement and assessment standards which did not best serve their students. The project's goal was to learn more about each school's programs particularly in assessment for placement, developmental standards, freshman composition standards, and proficiency standards for the two-year and four-year degrees. In addition English as a Foreign Language and special problems of minority language speakers became topics of discussion. The schedule of seminars with faculty at both schools covered five aspects of the writing programs: (1) placement agreements, (2) developmental English standards, (3) Freshman composition standards, and (4) lower division exit exams, and (5) proficiency standards. The project held two sessions for each phase, one at each campus and a joint workshop off-campus to explore issues arising from the campus sessions. Seventy percent of CSUB and 90 percent of BC department faculty participated in at least one session. Outcomes included proposed formal articulation of placement standards and curriculum, faculty professional growth, improved communication on both campuses, and publication of a research manual. Also included are recommendations for replication. (JB)

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Introduction

In the past, Bakersfield College (one of 106 California Community Colleges) and California State University, Bakersfield (one of 20 California State Universities), have suffered through years of jealousy and mistrust that very few of the current faculty at either school even understood. We just carried on the "tradition." Although we serve the same population, we developed standards of placement and assessment independently. Even though this practice seemed reasonable, it did not always serve the best interests of our students, especially those who planned to transfer from one institution to the other. In addition, the two schools (the only options for higher education in Bakersfield) have not always communicated standards, changes in policies, and reasons for such changes with each other. As a result, students have found themselves trying to meet two sets of requirements, often resulting in frustration and anger with one or both institutions. Faculty members responsible for formulating policy regarding assessment and placement did not benefit from learning about each other's successes or mistakes. The need for improved communication leading to formal articulation agreements and issue resolution was clear, a typical problem between most competing two- and four-year schools.

Putting pride aside, two faculty members (one from each campus) applied for and received a grant to begin to pull together these diverse communities. We were unsure where we were headed, but we were determined to get there. We called the project "Building Bridges: Articulating Placement and Assessment Procedures in Writing Courses at BC and CSUB."

We focused on key areas for both campuses: Assessment for Placement, Developmental Standards, Freshman Composition Standards, and Proficiency Standards for the Two- and Four-Year Degrees. Although not originally a part of the proposal, English as a Foreign Language and minority language speakers became ongoing topics of discussion as well. The goal of the project was not to duplicate one another's programs; we wanted to learn more about each other's programs so that we could develop formal articulation agreements and a better understanding of our local colleagues.

For each of the topics or "phases" of the project, we visited both campuses to become familiar with their procedures. We then met on "neutral ground" to discuss the information presented. As we became more comfortable with one

another, our discussion took on a more substantive note, with both groups admitting difficulties we face in placing and assessing students at all levels.

We met eleven times: seven times at the campuses and four times in neutral territory. An overwhelming majority of the faculty from both campuses participated in the joint activities. We never dreamed we could accomplish as much as we did!

Objectives

The two schools are somewhat isolated regionally and needed to work together to insure effective placement into and smooth transfer from one institution to the other. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in the past, due perhaps to misunderstandings. Because of this, the primary objective of the project was to open new and to improve old lines of communication between the two schools. Both schools were uninformed or even misinformed about each other's programs. So an additional objective was to learn more about the programs at several different levels, to share relevant documents, and to discover whether any agreements could be formally articulated. Any such agreements would simplify both the assessment process and the transfer process.

Everyone would agree that students in any institution benefit from well-conceived, coherent assessment procedures. As Edward M. White points out in his recent book entitled Teaching and Assessing Writing, the links between effective assessment and successful instruction are undeniable. Everyone profits from a sound assessment program on any level: entering students, transfer students, and graduating students. Thus, the primary goal of this grant proposal from Bakersfield College and California State University, Bakersfield, was to coordinate placement and assessment procedures in both institutions' writing programs.

We easily divided our major goal of coordinating assessment and placement procedures into five subdivisions as follows:

(1) to articulate placement agreements for entering students at both institutions;

(2) to compare developmental performance standards;

(3) to coordinate our freshman composition course goals and grading standards;

(4) to participate in the lower-division exit exam process;

(5) to correlate proficiency standards on both campuses.

We then developed each of these goals into a "phase" of our project, consisting of four activities: (1) an exchange of documents (such as test questions, grading rubrics, department policies, exam formats, course descriptions, course syllabi, and sample student papers) between the schools on a stated topic; (2) open discussion moving toward clear resolutions that were workable for both campuses; (3) a succinct statement of guidelines, pertaining to the subject at hand; and (4) formative and summative evaluation throughout the entire project, performed by an expert in writing assessment from the high school district office. This evaluation process was predominantly advisory, providing us insight into the effect each set of agreements would have on the secondary schools, but also helped us set up the criteria to be used for the summative evaluation at the end of the project.

Finally, we had some secondary agenda items for both our short- and long-term plans. For the short-term, we wanted to (1) standardize our terms and acronyms on both campuses so communication would be easier for both faculty and students; (2) consolidate some of our committees so they would either meet jointly or report regularly to one another; and (3) explore the use of computers for diagnosis at each performance level in our writing programs. For the long-range, we hoped to share more writing faculty on two different levels: both part-time faculty (with Master's Degrees) and Teaching Assistants, trained in the CSUB English Department's MA program and then placed in appropriate courses at either the state college or the community college.

Master Plan

Staffing consisted of two faculty members, one from each school, with limited released time. Each school also employed one student assistant. The consultant for the project, who directs the Kern High School District's Writing Proficiency Program, played an integral role in helping the project directors focus on particular issues to consider at each workshop. She read the evaluations from each of the sessions and the workshops (which she attended), using these comments to help direct the focus of future meetings. She also acted as a representative of the high school community, giving us important feedback about what the high schools needed from the two institutions of higher education.

Scheduling was one of the first and most important issues we dealt with as soon as we received the grant. With personal calendars in hand, the directors met frequently with each other, with campus representatives, and with department members to determine the best possible dates and times so that as many faculty as possible could participate. We chose Monday through Thursday afternoons for the campus sessions and Friday afternoons for the off-campus workshops. We scheduled two sessions for each phase, one at each campus to explain a particular process and to allow participation. A joint off-campus

workshop then followed to explore issues which arose from the campus sessions. Additionally, representatives from both campuses made brief presentations regarding the focus of the workshop.

So our schedule took shape as follows:

PHASE 1 PLACEMENT
BC Placement Essay Norming
EPT Placement Procedures
Placement Workshop

PHASE 2 DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH
English 100 Qualifying Exam: Norming and Grading
English 60 Exit Exam: Norming
Developmental Standards Workshop

PHASE 3 FRESHMAN COMPOSITION
CSUB Common Essay: Norming and Grading
Freshman Composition Workshop

PHASE 4/5 PROFICIENCY STANDARDS
Upper Division Writing Competency Exam: Norming and Grading
BC Writing Competency Test: Norming
Proficiency Standards Workshop

Implementation

We implemented our plan in the following way:

Phase 1: Placement Agreements

At the beginning of our schedule, we concentrated on the procedures both campuses use for placing students in appropriate writing classes. For CSUB, that is the systemwide English Placement Test; for BC, placement is determined from an objective test (ASSET) and an essay read holistically by English faculty who are normed in a general session at the beginning of each school term. In this first phase, after the exchange of documents and the open discussion, self-selected Cal State writing faculty participated in the community college training and reading. In this manner, community college faculty took part in the placement of CSU students based on the state EPT results. We both streamlined our placement efforts as much as possible and recorded the correlations we established in both developmental (those courses considered by each campus to be below freshman composition) and lower-division (our separate two-course freshman writing sequence) composition courses. Before this grant, CSUB and BC had no articulation agreements based on placement test scores, so we investigated the

problems arising from two different assessment instruments and began to solve some of those problems. We completed this phase by meeting with our consultant from the high school district to discuss our placement agreements and our plans to implement these agreements.

Phase 2: Developmental Standards

This second phase focused on developmental performance standards. This is an area in which CSUB and BC have met their separate students' needs but have never discussed mutually relevant issues at any length. In our brainstorming sessions for this proposal, we found an unexpected number of similarities in our two remedial programs. We began this phase with an exchange of documents and an open discussion about the issues related to developmental composition. As we moved toward various resolutions and a specific statement about local developmental standards, including an articulation agreement equating our various levels of remediation on both campuses, we participated in each campus's diagnosis and assessment of these students: Specifically, CSUB has a Qualifying Exam that consists of one essay graded holistically to determine whether or not the students are ready for freshman composition; BC has similar Final Essay Exams but uses a primary trait evaluation scoring process. In each case, faculty from the two campuses participated in the norming sessions and, if possible, in the holistic reading on the other campus. We ended this phase with some outside advice about our individual assessment procedures of developmental students and of the accuracy of our correlations on the two campuses.

Phase 3: Freshman Composition Standards

Phase 3 addressed the freshman composition standards on both campuses. Although both schools accept each other's courses in freshman writing, we know little about each other's diagnosis and evaluation within the courses themselves. During this phase of our project, we exchanged scoring rubrics, goals statements, course outlines, and sample student papers and scheduled an open discussion of issues related to freshman composition. Other activities at this stage concentrated on a "Common Essay" given for assessment at midterm by CSUB. In the middle of each quarter, all students in composition classes write an essay on one of two topics. These essays are then holistically graded by a panel of composition instructors. This holistic reading gives CSUB faculty a chance to talk about course goals and grading standards from remedial to senior-level writing. At this point, BC looked at CSUB grading standards and explored the benefits of extending this assessment procedure to their campus. To conclude this phase, we recorded our collective insights and agreements regarding freshman composition in particular and consulted with our outside evaluator.

Phase 4: Lower-Division Exit Exams

Next, we focused our attention in particular on BC's Writing Competency Test for their introductory freshman composition course. At present, this essay exam, graded departmentally by primary trait scoring, determines whether or not a student passes the first semester of freshman composition and may also serve as the proficiency exam for their AA degree. In this case, following our routine exchange of documents and open discussion, CSUB faculty participated in the norming session for this end-of-course assessment procedure, working to establish correlations between course goals and grading standards on both campuses. During this phase, we also looked at assessment and grading standards across the disciplines through our separate Writing Across the Curriculum programs. All observations were carefully recorded in a summary statement for this phase and were fine-tuned with the help of our outside consultant.

Phase 5: Proficiency Standards

Our last phase concentrated on the proficiency standards on both campuses. Both BC and CSUB require proof of writing competency before students graduate. At our brainstorming sessions for this proposal, we discovered that we both administer essay questions that require argumentative responses. After we exchanged and discussed documents relevant to this phase, we wanted to establish a local "Topic Bank" that both schools contribute to and can draw from (even though we demand different levels of performance in response to the questions). We also participated in the norming sessions for each other's holistic readings of these separate competency exams and, when possible, in the holistic readings themselves. We concluded with some statements for the outside consultant about local proficiency standards for the AA and the BA degrees, which, along with all of our other agreements, will be duplicated and circulated to the high schools in our service areas.

In every phase, each campus demonstrated for the other campus a particular placement process or assessment instrument at various levels of their programs. As part of the demonstration, the visiting campus then participated in some part of the actual evaluation process and went back to their own campus with a new understanding and usually an appreciation for their colleagues' procedures at the other school.

At the end of each phase, we scheduled a workshop on neutral territory (not on either campus) to discuss the similarities and differences in our procedures at each level of our writing programs and to see if we could reach any agreements so that students would not have to duplicate efforts in the two programs in both instruction and assessment. Once the trust was built up on the human level and faculty actually worked with each other's material, the agreements came naturally.

The entire project was co-directed by the English Department Liaison to the Director of Assessment at Bakersfield College and the Coordinator of the Writing Program at California State University, Bakersfield, with the BC representative serving as the primary investigator. Also directly involved in the grant were the CSUB English Department Chair and the BC Division Head, both of whom participated in the initial brainstorming sessions for this proposal. In addition to these primary participants, we distributed, prior to our first phase, a sign-up sheet, asking English faculty from both campuses to sign up on a voluntary basis for one or more of the activities in the five phases of the grant; they were able to choose among the information exchange, the open discussion, and/or the holistic reading activities in each phase. Both campuses have had so much interest in this kind of collaborative work that about 70% of the department at CSUB and 90% at BC decided to participate in at least one of the five phases. A typical faculty member signed up for only one norming session but usually two or three information exchanges. In any case, all department members on both campuses received copies of the paper work generated from our joint sessions.

Outcomes

The proposed formal articulation of placement standards and curriculum, a result of the project, will affect students directly by simplifying the processes for entering either institution and transferring from one institution to the other.

Within this framework, faculty were given an opportunity for professional growth by learning more about each other's programs, goals, and concerns, all of which were very similar at the two schools. In addition, the grant participants expressed a desire for continuing the process by meeting again to discuss issues touched on during the project. Finally, faculty have suggested other subject areas for future meetings, such as the literature survey courses taught at both schools. Most importantly, both schools have used the project to reexamine their programs and to initiate further, in-house discussions.

Communication has also improved laterally on both campuses. The English Department at BC has included the ESL department in its discussion of and voting on the proposed resolutions. Also, the BC Project Director has spoken to the President's Cabinet and to the Counseling Department--first as a means of explaining the project and then as a means of improving communication. Similar meetings have occurred on the CSUB campus, most particularly with the new Learning Disabilities Specialist.

The most important changes are the formal resolutions which articulate placement into and successful completion of courses at both campuses. These

resolutions, once approved by both schools, were shared with all departments, in the schools and with the feeder high schools.

Our most tangible product was the Resource Manual that we published, including placement procedures and new articulation agreements between the schools. Course descriptions, outlines, sample syllabi, and assignments for all writing courses at both campuses are the heart of the publication. This manual was distributed not only to both BC and CSUB English faculty bit also to key personnel at all of the high schools in our common service area. In fact, we are still in the process of "Building Bridges" with this third community as we give in-service workshops and go to administrative meetings to distribute our manual to the high schools. The demand for this volume has been overwhelming. We even received orders for the manual from elementary schools and from counselors at all levels. It is seen in our local community as an agreed-upon statement about the requirements and demands of higher education in our area. The book itself has had several uses in the community that range from counseling to academic preparation for college.

Continuing to Build Bridges

Both schools have followed up on these grant activities in a variety of ways:

First, we continue to participate in each other's grading sessions. In addition the community college Project Director has participated in California State University readings on the state level.

In close collaborative fashion, the Project Directors have also delivered six professional papers together on topics ranging from teaching literature to funding grant proposals.

In addition, the Community College district made a joint 1991 Innovator of the Year Award to both Project Directors--breaking years of tradition by giving a community college award to a CSU faculty member.

Also, the two schools continue to meet throughout the year--at informal local exchanges regarding the writing curriculum and at an annual scheduled retreat when the writing faculty from both campuses retreat into the mountains for a full day to discuss the curriculum and any pressing related issues.

And finally, we include the high school English faculty from our service area in one meeting per year.

Recommendations

Here are our best recommendations for replicating this project:

1. Make sure the Director(s) have enough released time.

2. Include key people (Department Chairs, Division Chairs) in all brainstorming and initial planning sessions.

3. Include many colleagues in planning and presentations so they feel involved and committed.

4. Keep everyone, including non-participants, informed of developments through regular communication.

5. Recognize professional expertise by paying all presenters and participants.

6. Talk regularly to your counterpart at the other campus.

7. Make a conscious and continuous effort to keep the lines of communication open after the formal aspect of your project is complete.

Conclusion

Participants filled out evaluation forms along the way. Over and over participants stressed the "comfortable atmosphere" and the pleasure in getting to know one another. Relationships began to form as participants met at more than one session of the project. Future working relationships began to be established. We also received constant feedback from a third community--our outside consultant from the Writing Proficiency Program in the Kern High School District and our direct link to the high school English Department Chairs.

"Building Bridges" proved to be an apt title for the project, for we have indeed begun to build bridges of communication, understanding, and respect. These opportunities for professional growth were unparalleled in our region but can and should be replicated in as many combinations as possible. This project not only improved relationships among the schools at all levels but, ultimately, improved our students' lives, both directly and indirectly.